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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the manner in which one highly sophisticated sample of moral thinkers personify their moral values through the selection of moral exemplars. Participants, designated "nominators," were 22 distinguished scholars who had devoted much of their professional lives to thinking and writing about morality and related issues. These individuals included psychologists, philosophers, theologians, political scientists, and historians. The sample was chosen to represent the range of American political ideology and to include men and women, blacks and whites, and Jews, Catholics, and Protestants. Each nominator was given a semi-structured interview lasting about 2 hours during which a preliminary list of criteria offering a basis for identifying moral exemplars was presented for comment and modification. Nominators were also asked to provide a list of living persons who exemplified the revised criteria, as well as comments on the appropriateness of exemplars suggested by other nominators. Reasons behind each nominator's suggestions were thoroughly explored. Results concerning characteristics of the nominations are discussed and preliminary and revised criteria for defining moral exemplars are listed. Contrary to expectations, the revised set of criteria was acceptable to the sample of nominators. (RH)

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The Personification of Moral Values Through the Designation of Moral Exemplars

Symposium Presentation at April 1987
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Like many literary devices (Burke, 1965), personification is a powerful tool of everyday symbolic thinking. It brings astract ideas to life in human form. Not only can personification help us understand and communicate elusive notions, but its rhetorical force often compels action in the service of such notions.

We believe that, in the everyday course of human events, moral values are frequently espoused, followed, and upheld through reference to their assumed personification in individual lives. Both moral behavior and moral influence rely heavily on personification, and neither can be explained without an adequate analysis of personification's workings. This is because moral choices are constructed in the context of relationships with real people and moral ideas have behavioral meaning only as they are actively interpreted in this context. Moral personification is a ready-made means of creating such interpretations, since it brings with it direct specifications for action consequences.

But there are many questions that must be asked about moral personification before we can understand this process. Most importantly, we need to know the parallels and contrasts between the various forms of moral personification. We know that there are widespread discrepancies between people's choices of moral exemplars. One person's devil may be another's saint. Many latter-day saints indeed have been reviled in their own time and place. Far from perfect consensus exists in the world at any one time about who is acting morally and who is not.

Nevertheless, moral choices, including choices of morally exemplary persons, are not wholly idiosyncratic or arbitrary. The very construct of morality implies some shared sense of values and principles that guides such choices. Although the interpretation of these values and principles always leaves room for debate and always yields some variation, there is enough common ground to provide a basis for discourse.

The purpose of the present study was to determine the manner in-which one highly sophisticated sample of moral thinkers personify their moral values through the selection of moral exemplars. This study is part of larger project in which we are exploring the lives and ideas of the designated moral exemplars themselves. The present report focuses only on what we call the "nominating" phase of the larger project.

In the overall project, we have chosen to study the lives of people who are seen by "expert judges" as outstandingly moral in order to determine what special characteristics they may have and how they came to have those characteristics. We are not assuming, for example, that they will reason at the highest stages of Kohlberg's developmental hierarchy. Whether all of the morally outstanding individuals we study do use sophisticated moral judgment is a question that we will be able to address. Our expectation is that they won't. We will also be interested to see whether any talents, character traits, or motivational patterns

are common to the group as a whole or to some subgroups within our sample. Social factors in the exemplars' development will be studied, as well as the social influence of the exemplars on others.

The nominating method

The nominators were 22 distinguished scholars who have devoted much of their professional lives to thinking and writing about morality and related issues. Included in this group were psychologists, philosophers, theologians, political scientists, and historians. The group was chosen to represent the range of American political ideology, from right to left, and to include both men and women, blacks and whites, Jews, Catholics, and Protestants.

Our decision to employ moral scholars rather than laypersons as nominators reflects our desire to solicit the opinions of people who have already thought long and carefully about moral problems. We suspected that if we instead conducted a broadly sampled survey, we would not be able precisely to determine the grounds on which selections were being made. Definitional problems in presenting our criteria, and in discussing the very notions of "moral" and "exemplar," would abound. We were confident that a group of scholars who have closely studied moral concepts would anticipate definitional problems. They would be careful to match their use of moral terms with ours or to clearly communicate their

disagreements with our understanding of such concepts. They would also be likely to explicate fully the assumptions behind their selections.

Furthermore, we were interested in finding out whether these people, who are especially thoughtful about morality, would share a common set of criteria for defining moral exemplariness or whether they would diverge in their views in a way that is irreconcilable. If we had used a sample of laypersons and found no consensus, it might be appropriate to interpret the inconsistencies as resulting from the respondents' lack of sophistication. On the other hand, if there is no agreement even among experts, we would conclude that it is not possible to develop one set of criteria that define outstanding morality to people of differing backgrounds and ideological positions.

Each nominator was given a semi-structured interview lasting about two hours. During the nominating interviews, we presented a preliminary list of criteria which we believed offered a basis for identifying moral exemplars. We then asked each nominator to comment in detail on each of these preliminary criteria. The nominator was given an opportunity to modify our criteria, to add new ones, or to delete ones that he or she disagreed with.

In the remainder of the interview, the nominator was asked to suggest living people that fit the revised criteria and to comment on the appropriateness of exemplars suggested by other nominators.

In each case, we thoroughly explored with the nominator the reasons behind the suggestion.

The preliminary list of criteria is shown on the first slide:

1. A sustained commitment to definable moral principles.

2. A consistent tendency to act in accordance with these principles.

3. A willingness to affirm (rather than deny or misrepresent) one's acts, and to overtly express the principles that constitute one's moral rationale for such acts.

4. A willingness to risk personal well-being for the sake of one's moral principles.

5. A capacity for creating and projecting a moral vision, including particularly the ability to generate innovative solutions to moral problems.

6. A talent for inspiring others to moral action.

7. A dedicated responsiveness to the needs of others.

In addition, because in the next phase of the project we plan to interview the nominees, the individuals that we choose to study must be alive, fluent in English, and potentially accessible for interviewing.

The nominating interviews were recorded on audiotape and transcribed.

Results

Feedback on the selection criteria: The criteria served their purpose in communicating our general intent to the nominators. All nominators accepted at least some of our preliminary criteria, and all were willing to suggest revisions that would make the list acceptable to them.

Most nominators suggested revisions, deletions, or additions of one or more criteria. There was some variation in these suggestions, but not perhaps as much as one might expect, especially considering the diverse backgrounds, disciplines, and ideologies represented by the nominators. In fact, most of the comments clustered around five main issues. These were:

1. The overly cognitive and rationalist connotations of the phrase "definable moral principles" in Criterion 1. Suggestions were that we drop the notion of definability and that we add the phrase "or sustained evidence of moral virtue." In this way we allow for perspectives that draw on a moral tradition of virtue theory as well as perspectives that frame morality in terms of principles.

2. The overly formalistic, or "content-empty," phrasing of Criterion 1. We had intended this in order to avoid injecting our personal moral biases, but several nominators urged us to adopt some uncontestible standards that make it clear that not just any principle or value counts as a moral one.

3. The addition of "means-ends" consistency to the "consistent tendency" mentioned in Criterion 2. It was asserted, and we agreed, that in any case this was an unarticulated part of our intended meaning for this criterion.

4. The mistaken assumption of Criterion 3 that it is always possible for highly moral people to openly affirm their actions. Several times it was pointed out to us that exemplary individuals often must survive in oppressive societies. Under such conditions it is unrealistic to expect forthrightness on every occasion.

5. The mistaken assumption of Criterion 5 that moral exemplars necessarily create new visions and innovative solutions. Several nominators insisted that their selections were not extraordinarily inventive people. Moral exemplars, they believed, often dedicate their lives to visions originally expressed by others and to values commonly known by all. It is the expression of moral values through one's life that creates the example, not the origination of a new vision.

6. The addition of "humility" as a virtue that distinguishes moral exemplars. One of the most frequent comments by our nominators was that the persons selected would hesitate to identify themselves as moral exemplars. Self-aggrandizement and dogmatism were seen as negative indicators. Morally exemplary persons, it was asserted, are necessarily dedicated to missions, values, or persons beyond themselves and maintain some humility about their relation to those goals.

Overall, there was substantial overlap and virtually no contradictions in the revisions suggested by our nominators. In order to be considered a moral exemplar, an individual must meet

all six of the criteria. The revised criteria are shown in the second slide.

The nominations: 108 persons were nominated as living moral exemplars. For all the compatibility in nominators' comments about criteria, there was little overlap in their actual nominations. Only 11 persons on the list were nominated more than once, and the greatest number of times any one person was nominated was 5 (This was Mother Teresa).

The composition of the group reveals why there was so little overlap in nominators' choices. About half of those nominated were persons who would be known only relatively locally and would not be familiar to most of the nominators. The others are indeed media figures, but many of these have taken clear positions on controversial political and social issues. As might be predicted, nominators tended to choose exemplars who reflected their own political leanings. As our nominators ranged across the political spectrum, their choices varied accordingly.

The tendency of nominators to choose exemplars with compatible political views was not repeated for the variable of gender. Although men and women were nominated in approximately equal proportions, there was no marked proclivity for male nominators to choose male exemplars or for female nominators to choose female ones. This was also true of race, with the exception of one black nominator who made a special effort to tell us about black exemplars who have been little known in white communities.

The five exemplars who received more than two nominations had little in common other than their status as media figures. They were: Mother Teresa, Archibald Cox, Pope John Paul II, Ralph Nader, and Rosa Parks. Of the five, Mother Teresa was the least controversial by far. In reacting to her nomination, virtually none of the other nominators raised serious objections. In contrast, Ralph Nader was actively "de-nominated" by at least four other nominators.

In general, the more apolitical the choice, the fewer the objections in other nominators' reactions.

Conclusions

We were encouraged, though somewhat surprised, to find that we could come up with a set of criteria for identifying moral exemplars that were acceptable to a diverse group of highly sophisticated moral scholars. Given the broad religious, ideological, racial, ethnic, and gender mix of our nominator sample, we consider the consensus on criteria to be noteworthy.

The criteria, of course, are abstract and somewhat indeterminate guidelines for choice. They leave considerable room for interpretation.

Such ambiguity was at least partly responsible for the wide diversity in our nominators' selections of actual living personifications of these criteria. As we have said, in the large group of nominations that we received, there were very few multiple selections. The only persen who both received multiple nominations and who was acceptable to other nominators as well was Mother Teresa. Beyond this, the only significant agreement on moral exemplars was confined to two men who are no longer living: Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King. Both were mentioned often.

Any set of judgmental criteria will yield less than perfect interjudge reliability. But the discrepency in our study between the criteria and their application seems large, particularly when the sophistication of the judges and the general acceptability of the criteria are considered. What accounts for this large variability in our nominators' selections?

Some of the variability arose from the simple lack of shared information about many of the selected exemplars. Many of the exemplars were people who are not widely known beyond their own communities.

But a sizable number (perhaps half) of the nominations went to persons who are publically known. Why was there so little replication among these well known figures? Why, among a group of nominators that shared some sense of criteria for moral good, was there so little consensus about which public figures personify that good?

It may be characteristic of our culture that few symbols of the good are shared within contemporary social life. Culture-wide moral imagery tends to be historical. For this reason, there are very few living figures who come to represent moral goodness for large numbers of people.

Living moral leaders are actively engaged in issues that affect all of us in contemporary society, and these issues are frequently controversial. Because of the diversity in the nominator group, the nominators took very disparate positions regarding such issues. A nominator who, for example, championed the pro-choice movement was unlikely to nominate a pro-life advocate, and vice versa. Thus, the disparity in nominations went beyond a lack of salience to active disagreement.

Generally such disagreement took the form of selective intepretation of information about a proposed exemplar to make it more or less favorable. For example, a nominator who believes in the consumer rights issue interprets Ralph Nader's obstinence as principled commitment and his sparse life style as a sign of self-sacrifice. A nominator who rejects Naderism as a illegitimate infringment on the free market interprets these same characteristics as signs of arrogance or as careerist ploys.

PRELIMINARY CRITERIA FOR DEFINING MORAL EXEMPLARS

1. A SUSTAINED COMMITMENT TO DEFINABLE MORAL PRINCIPLES.

2. A CONSISTENT TENDENCY TO AC IN ACCORDANCE WITH THESE PRINCIPLES.

3. A WILLINGNESS TO AFFIRM (RATHER THAN DENY OR MISREPRESENT) ONE'S ACTS, AND TO OVERTLY EXPRESS THE PRINCIPLES THAT CONSTITUTE ONE'S MORAL RATIONALE FOR SUCH ACTS.

4. A WILLINGNESS TO RISK PERSONAL WELL-BEING FOR THE SAKE OF ONE'S MORAL PRINCIPLES.

5. A CAPACITY FOR CREATING AND PROJECTING A MORAL VISION, INCLUDING PARTICULARLY THE ABILITY TO GENERATE INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS TO MORAL PROBLEMS.

6. A TALENT FOR INSPIRING OTHERS TO MORAL ACTION.

7. A DEDICATED RESPONSIVENESS TO THE NEEDS OF OTHERS.

REVISED CRITERIA FOR DEFINING MORAL EXEMPLARS

1. A SUSTAINED COMMITMENT TO MORAL PRINCIPLES THAT ARE UNIVERSALIZABLE AND INCLUDE A GENERALIZED RESPECT FOR HUMANITY; OR A SUSTAINED EVIDENCE OF MORAL VIRTUE.

2. A CONSISTENT TENDENCY TO ACT IN ACCORD WITH ONE'S MORAL VALUES, IMPLYING ALSO A CONSISTENCY BETWEEN THE MEANS AND ENDS OF ONE'S ACTIONS.

3. A WILLINGNESS TO RISK ONE'S SELF-INTEREST FOR THE SAKE OF ONE'S MORAL VALUES.

4. A CHARACTERISTIC OF INSPIRING OTHERS TO MORAL ACTION.

5. A DEDICATED RESPONSIVENESS TO THE LIVES OF OTHERS.

6. A SENSE OF HUMILITY ABOUT ONE'S OWN IMPORTANCE RELATIVE TO THE WORLD AT LARGE.

In this way, nominators can agree on the criteria for choosing moral exemplars but still disagree on their application in specific instances. As a consequence, the applications are driven as much by the nominators' own positions with respect to contemporary social issues as by the exemplar's fit with the abstract criteria.

In the case of historical figures, there is a formalization of the person through stylistic renditions and symbolic events. We set aside national holidays, produce icon-like public images, and fill the media and textbooks with idealized accounts of their lives. Many of the figures' human imperfections are deleted, and the living complexities of the positions they fought for and against are glossed over. As a result, the historical moral figure becomes a socially shared symbol of the good.

When there is a rare consensus around a living moral exemplar, the individual is also seen as a rather stylized symbol. In our study the only such case was Mother Teresa.

To explain Mother Teresa's unusual acceptibility as a moral exemplar, we would point to the following attributes: First, the cause that she champions through her actions, caring for the desperately needy through voluntary aid, is uncontroversial by any ideological standard. (If, in contrast, she were known mostly through actions in service of her specific doctrinal beliefs, Mother Teresa no doubt would lose much of her universal appeal).

Second, her membership in a religious order may also contribute to her symbolic quality. Her personal life is obscure, and she works within an institutional framework that legitimizes selflessness and makes it credible. In contrast, Ralph Nader, who was a much more controversial nomination, is in some ways too familiar. He is less remote and thus harder to idealize than a nun working primarily in India. Working without an institutional context, Nader is easier to dismiss as a malcontent, an eccentric, or even as opportunistic and power hungry. Add to this the fact that his mission is less universally admired than that of Mother Teresa, and it is easy to see why he is reviled by some even while he is chosen by others as morally outstanding.

In the next phase of this project, we will interview and gather a broad range of data on as many of the nominated exemplars as are willing to participate. As our examples have indicated, the nominees form a diverse group. We will be trying to find out if the process of engagement in the activities for which they were nominated is similar across this wide ranging group. We will look at issues such as moral courage, the place of moral values in the sense of self, and the inspirational and leadership characteristics of these people, each of whom has been chosen by at least one of our nominators to represent exceptional moral virtue.